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## The Concept of the Marriage and Its Importance in the Austen's Novels

Marriage is at the heart of every Jane Austen novel, or, at the very least, at the end of them, as every one of Austen's heroines find themselves at 'The End' with a husband, a fortune and lifelong happiness. In reality, however, women often had to make a choice between love and money and hope that lifelong happiness would follow, and while popular opinion favoured 'love and esteem', many conduct manuals of the period instructed that 'self preservation above inclination' would ensure marital bliss (Jones, 2009, p. 1, 11). Marriage, therefore, was incredibly important to young ladies as it could destroy or secure future contentment, and to Austen, the importance of marriage can be considered threefold, in terms of its importance to society, to the individual and its importance in terms of morality and virtue. In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, marriage is important as a means of socioeconomic mobility, an exploration of morality and 'proper' conduct and as a social contract that affects the wider community.

"She found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village."

*Sense and Sensibility*, Chapter 50

When Marianne married Colonel Brandon, she not only gained a husband and a fortune but numerous social and domestic responsibilities and would have been expected and encouraged to adopt a new role within society, Elizabeth would have faced similar duties in Derbyshire as Mrs Darcy (Jones, 2009, p. 136). Interestingly, the liveliest heroines of these novels become the wives who happily take on the most social responsibility, in this way, Austen presents marriage in a realistic practical context and criticizes elopement as it fails meet the important demands of the wider community, in contrast, Lydia's decision to run away with Wickham is presented as foolish and irresponsible (Sundari, 2015). The practical and proper marriages of the heroines in these novels brings joy to both their families and to the wider community, and for women of the period, marriage was a means of participating in society in a meaningful sense (Jones, 2009, p. 136).

However, the legitimacy and propriety of Marianne's marriage in *Sense and Sensibility* is

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juxtaposed with the passionate attachment she had with Willoughby and the unfortunate marriage of Brandon's cousin Eliza who succumbed to social expectations and faced ruination for it. While Marianne's decision to marry Brandon and take practical steps towards contributing to society rather than uphold her earlier ideals and remain unmarried may not seem to be a 'happy ending' from an objective standpoint, Austen describes Marianne as "as much devoted to her husband as [she] had once been to Willoughby", and as such prioritizes a socially beneficial and companionate approach to marriage (Galperin, 2003, p. 110). Importantly, Marianne makes a choice to enter society through marriage, whereas Eliza is coerced into a disastrous marriage with Brandon's brother with consequences seemingly taken directly from a moralist pamphlet, here Austen makes a distinction between marriages that have the advantage of being socially advantageous and marriages that purely exist for this purpose (Jones, 2009, p. 139). Of course, not every one of Austen's marriages that is purely socially or socioeconomically motivated fails so dramatically, Charlotte's marriage to Collins is entirely contractual and operates with no dire consequences to either party or their community, but is, comparatively not as successful as Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy. In this sense, *Pride and Prejudice* is a far more idealistic novel than *Sense and Sensibility* in its depiction of marriage as a union of the individual and society (Poovey, 1984, p. 17).

"Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony"

Jane Austen, Letter to Fanny Knight

*Sense and Sensibility* is also comparably candid when it comes to the importance of marrying for money, especially in the eyes of the heroines who are acutely aware that they need to marry well to stave off destitution. With no relatives willing to support Elinor and Marianne, they are required to marry above their station as they have no means of earning money for themselves. Fortunately, Austen and moralists of the day agreed that 'inequality of wealth' is not a hinderance to marriage so long as the other party is mutual in character (Jones, 2009, p. 9). This is true of Elizabeth and Jane and Elinor and Marianne who are held in high esteem by their communities but interestingly the mercenary men in these novels tend to be presented as anything but worthy of the wealthy women they prey upon. These men, like Austen's heroines, need to marry to live a comfortable life, whereas, the single men in possession of good fortunes, while they may be in want of a wife, are not in need of a wife. However, the heroines are not predatory and motivated purely by money as the men seem to be, in fact, Elizabeth's refusal of two well-to-do suitors is the antithesis of Wickham's preying upon two wealthy young women, and while Darcy's 10,000 a year is not inconsequential, it is not as important to Austen as mutual regard and affection even at the risk of a 'penny-scraping existence' (Jones, 2009, p. 11). However, Austen is a realist, and perhaps even a cynic inasmuch as she is a romantic, and every one of her heroines in need of socioeconomic mobility is provided with it, and Mrs

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Bennet's life goal to marry off her daughters, while seemingly silly, is an important one in order to assure the happiness of her family.

"Oh, Lizzy! Do anything rather than marry without affection."

- Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 59

Interestingly, marriages to Austen are important as means of rewarding and punishing behaviour, and the happiest marriages to Austen are symbiotic unions based on mutual strength of character and are earned after 'hard work, perseverance, love and luck' (Sundari, 2015). The importance of marriage is most prominent here, particularly, the importance of carefully seeking a complementary partner. Elizabeth and Jane's parents are terribly matched, as her father does not respect the woman he married after being "dazzled by youth, vivacity and beauty", their daughters are far more cautious, perhaps too cautious according to Charlotte, but nonetheless, rewarded for their virtue and judgement (Jones, 2009, p. 21). Women in the period had little autonomy except in regards to marriage, and Austen sagely elevates this decision beyond mere physical compatibility, Lydia makes her choice too quickly, based on passion and must endure a life of Wickham's gambling and philandering (Jones, 2009, p. 157). Marianne's marriage to Brandon whom she was not initially attracted to mirrors Lydia's elopement with Wickham and her own feelings towards Willoughby, if she had remained with Willoughby would she have remained happy once the physical attraction had worn off, or would Willoughby have followed in Wickham's footsteps and sought other companions leaving Marianne powerless? (Jones, 2009, p. 157). Once married, women forfeited most of their autonomy and were at the mercy of their husbands, Austen stresses the importance of an informed and measured decision.

The 'ideal' central marriages in each novel are challenged and strengthened by the marriages of the supporting characters throughout. The loveless union of the Collins' provides the setting for Elizabeth's refusal of Darcy, just as the well matched Gardiners serve as Elizabeth's guide as she enters into a more civil relationship with him at Pemberley. Elinor contemplates the impact of unhappy marriages at length as the ludicrous pairing of the Palmers sets the stage for her learning of Lucy and Edward's engagement and lamenting his assured future misery. Through this, Elinor comes to realize that many men are taken in by beautiful but stupid women and spend their lives paying for it, this is a theme reflected in both novels and through Elinor's sound and sensible judgement, Austen explores the potential for even intelligent people, like Edward and Mr Bennet, to make bad decisions when it comes to marriage (Jones, 2009, p. 147). These 'less than perfect' marriages are part and parcel of Austen's novels and Austen seems to suggest that it is important to be circumspect during courtship and that "extreme feelings were transient and could not be maintained" but that compatibility in marriage required affection, mutual respect and complimentary temperaments (Jones, 2003, p. 146).

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Marriage, to Austen, is important because it is the means by which her heroines achieve happiness and fulfilment, a balanced and well considered marriage provides her heroines with a strong social support network, good socioeconomic standing and a symbiotic union of like-minded and loving people. Austen's novels provide insight and sophisticated social commentary about the role and importance of marriage in society that is still relevant, and while seemingly 'counter-conduct' provides sound and reasonable moral instruction to her readers in their own romantic endeavours. Beyond these 'higher' more complex uses, Austen understood the importance of marriage at the end of a romance novel as a reward for perseverance and good behaviour and a potential source of joy and misery for the unscrupulous and foolhardy.

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